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Trafficking: Criminals exploit \$2bn business

By Kerin Hope

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The half-dozen freshly painted bedrooms, computer room and pile of textbooks and CDs for learning English suggest the building in a low-income Athens neighbourhood is a student hostel. But the presence of a broad-shouldered security guard and a surveillance camera above the front door tell a different story.

The Athens branch of "Doctors of the World" has opened the first official shelter in Greece for victims of trafficking, as part of a programme financed by the Greek foreign ministry.

The residents are a handful of young women from east Europe who had been forced to work in Greece as prostitutes.

One of them, a 30-year-old Russian book-keeper, who gives her name as Christina, says she came to Greece expecting to work as a dancer but found she had been "sold" to a Greek trafficker. She was driven around Athens with a bodyguard to spend evenings with his clients at their homes or in luxury hotels.

"I lived with another girl in a small apartment, with just one man guarding us. We were careful, we didn't make trouble," she says. "The day he forgot to turn the lock we left and took a taxi to the Doctors of the World office."

Greece's foreign ministry came up with €2.4m in grants to finance six shelters for trafficking victims after the US government this year threatened to impose economic sanctions.

According to the US state department's latest annual report on trafficking, published last June, Greece was placed in Tier 3 - the lowest ranking - among 15 countries that failed to meet the minimum standard on combating the problem.

By September cabinet ministers had put their signatures to a presidential decree needed to implement a framework law making trafficking a crime. The state department has since promoted Greece to Tier 2, the same ranking as the other Balkan countries, which it says are making "a significant effort" to deter and punish traffickers.

Greece is a destination for trafficking in illegal immigrants, child workers and prostitutes, mainly from the Balkan countries and the former Soviet Union and about 18,000 people arrived last year, according to the state department report.

Prof Grigoris Lazos, a sociologist at Athens University, says about 20,000 women work in the commercial
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sex industry in Greece. They come mainly from Moldova, Romania, Russia and Ukraine. Some are smuggled across Greece's borders with Bulgaria and Albania, while others arrive as tourists.

"This is a business worth over €2bn a year in Greece with close links to organised crime both here and elsewhere in the region," Prof Lazos says. Because Greece lacked legislation against trafficking, small-scale operations involving a few women were able to flourish. Prof Lazos says a Greek trafficker would spend "€3,000-€4,000 to acquire two or three women from a local trafficker in Bulgaria, for example, and bring them to Athens."

Andreas Loverdos, deputy foreign minister, says the government is preparing measures to bring Greece in line with its European Union partners on counter-trafficking measures. Funding will be allocated from a €600m Greek aid package for the Balkans to NGOs in neighbouring countries to finance rehabilitation programmes for trafficked women who return home.

"We are determined to crack down," Mr Loverdos says. "These women are being recognised as victims of trafficking rather than illegal prostitutes and we are funding the activities of civil society in Greece and in their home countries to protect them."

"Christina" says she was lucky because her "buyer" had allowed her to make several visits to a dentist who gave her the address of the Doctors of the World office.

Many trafficked women picked up in police sweeps of bars and nightclubs have been kept in custody as illegal immigrants and then deported. Several traffickers have been arrested, and some have been fined for procuring. But there have been no convictions yet under the new law.

Nikitas Kanakis, a Doctors of the World representative in Greece, says that mandatory repatriation of foreign women working in the sex industry has failed to reduce the extent of trafficking, and that trafficking victims should be allowed to apply for residence and work permits in Greece.

"Women being sent back by rail to Romania say they found their pimps waiting for them at the first station after the train crossed the border," he says. "And some women are too ashamed to return home because of what's happened to them and drift back into prostitution."

The Athens shelter, modelled on similar projects in Italy, is intended to provide trafficked women with a safe environment and psychological support for several months, he says. Doctors of the World and other NGOs in Athens will try to find jobs for the first group of residents in the shelter, several of whom say they want to stay in Greece.

"These women have a good standard of education - that's one of the reasons they didn't want to stay in their own countries. They are keen to learn more Greek and English so that they can get jobs here," Dr Kanakis says.

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